POST-CAPITALIST DESIRE

Built upon the intricately sketched landscape of Capitalist Realism*, at the heart of the naturalised order of appearances assumed to render all alternatives impossible, 'Post-Capitalist Desire' is a climax in Mark's commitment to envision a future for the left. It calls into question capital's long-established monopoly on desire.*

Why should a desire for technology and consumer goods appear necessarily to mean a desire for capitalism? The conflation, Mark argues, results from capital's opportunist aligning of technology and desire. This occurs on capital's own terms when "anti-capitalism entails being anarcho-primitivist": finding solutions in a self-organizational 'organicist-localism' while

maintaining a stance that is anti-technological, anti-mass production. An explicitly antagonist left falls short of gaining traction on the libidinal flows of social drive that are already animated by capital and are further enabling its processes in return.

A post-capitalist politics begins with affirming that this structural antagonism should therefore be reconsidered because of its being heedless of capital's programmed reality. But it also refuses to remain caught up in ideology critique, circumscribed under the crust of complaint and denunciation. To strategise against capitalism is to summon and reclaim the possible "Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us".[1]

Mark identifies the challenges that a future-oriented left needs to face by tying conservative, reactionary statements that hold up capital's techno-libidinal conflation to a certain strand in the writings of Nick Land from the 1990s. Via Land—the 'avatar of accelerated capital'—Mark exposes how the prime mandate of capitalism is to capture libidinal circuitries and channel public desiring in certain directions rather than others.

As Mark calls them elsewhere, "libidinal technicians"[2] *have embedded their parasitic mechanisms into everyday*

1 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Verso, 2009), p. 18.

2 Mark Fisher, 'How To Kill a Zombie: Strategizing the End of Neoliberalism', in *openDemocracy*. 18 July 2013.

life and grown their 'semiotic excrescences' on the bodies of individuals. It is then made clear that a traditional 'leftist-Canutist' attitude is incapable of desire-engineering. It is fundamentally opposed to such engineering in its anti-libidinal insistence on conservatism: "preserving, protecting and defending".

Determined to break from Landian thanatophoric fatalism, Mark incites a post-capitalism commensurate with the 'inorganic nature of libido'—the death drive. This is not a desire for death or for the extinction of desire, which is characteristic of both the apocalyptic acceleration of deterritorialising processes and of the 'ascetic-authoritarian' measures imposed by communist states. Rather, it is a desire to push an organism's life out of obdurate homeostasis, away from a life forcefully lived along the lines of preservation and protection.

In 'Utopia as Replication', Fredric Jameson turns to Marx to restate that destratifying forces of capital tend toward "the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor".[3] In other words, capital tends towards the emergence of the General Intellect and the growth of monopoly, of a reterritorialised extremity after ultimate deterritorialisation. Jameson, in a self-admittedly perverse move, tends to identify this monopoly, best exemplified in the post-Fordist context of late capitalism by the largest company in the world, Wal-Mart, as a utopian phenomenon.

3 Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1* (Penguin, 1976), p. 929.

Mark argues for a turn from the anti-capitalist 'no logo' call to a post-capitalist 'counterbranding' via Jameson's outlining of a utopian method, where a logical operation of inverted genealogy was attempted—a genealogy of contingent futurities. To locate utopian impulses in the preconditions that are already reserved in the present is to target that which was promised by the cultural revolutions of the left and yet was never delivered; spotting the 'residual' only to leave it in search of the 'emergent'.

The demand of this pursuit of abandoned promises is to address and rework substructures that lend support to the apparent reality, away from the underlying Real(s) and fundamentally designed against the fulfillment of desires—only feeding and stimulating them enough to be always worthy of capture, ready to be milked. Hence the recovered evocation of 'designer socialism', in the absence of which the design of capitalist realism has been made to appear unrivaled.

It is then evident that the Landian take on the death drive and the 'historical-machinic force of libido' is biased against taking the reterritorialising turn, deeming it impossible, or its possibility insignificant. However, it is in the course of this turn that the left needs to implement its 'counterlibidinal' politics. "[D]isarticulating technology and desire from capital", while simultaneously intensifying the processes of deterritorialisation only in the manner of "de-anchoring

[...] *the libidinal fragments from the capitalist sigils with which they are arbitrarily articulated", as Mark prefigured in 'Digital Psychedelia', an essay on The Otolith Group's* Anathema.[4]

To march toward and build (around) an Acid Communism *requires "a new use of digital machinery, a new kind of digital desire: a digital psychedelia, no less.* [...] *It dilates time; induces us to linger* and *drift" as it "rediscovers the dream time that capitalist realism has eclipsed".[5] To host post-capitalism is to expand the presumably unaffordable spans of time from the side of the future. As Jameson maintains, "[s]uch revival of futurity and of the positing of alternate futures is not itself a political program nor even a political practice: but it is hard to see how any durable or effective political action could come into being without it".[6]*

Mahan Moalemi

4 Mark Fisher, 'Digital Psychedelia: The Otolith Group's *Anathema*', in *Death and Life of Fiction: Modern Monsters – Taipei Biennial 2012 Journal* (Spectormag, 2014), pp. 160–166.

5 Ibid.

6 Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (Verso, 2009), p. 434.

Soon after the Occupy London Stock Exchange movement had begun, the novelist turned Conservative politician Louise Mensch appeared on the BBC TV programme, *Have I Got News For You?*, mocking the protesters with the claim that the occupation had led to the "biggest ever queues at Starbucks". The problem, Mensch insisted, was not only that the occupiers bought corporate coffee—they also used iPhones. The suggestion was clear: being anti-capitalist entails being an anarcho-primitivist. Mensch's remarks were ridiculed, not least on the programme itself, but the questions that they raise can't be so easily dismissed. If opposition to capital does not require that one maintains an anti-technological, anti-mass production stance, why—in the minds of some of its supporters, as much as in the caricatures produced by opponents such as Mensch—has anti-capitalism become exclusively identified with this organicist localism? Here we are a long way from Lenin's enthusiasm for Taylorism, or Gramsci's celebration of Fordism, or indeed from the Soviet embrace of technology in the space race. Capital has long tried to claim a monopoly on desire: we only have to remember the famous 1980s advert for Levi jeans in which a teenager was seen anxiously smuggling a pair of jeans through a Soviet border post. But the emergence of consumer electronic goods has

allowed capital to conflate desire and technology so that the desire for an iPhone can now appear automatically to mean a desire for capitalism. Here we think of another advertisement, Apple's notorious '1984' commercial, which equated personal computers with the liberation from totalitarian control.

Mensch was not alone in taunting the occupiers for their consumption of chain coffee and their reliance on consumer technologies. In the London *Evening Standard*, one columnist crowed that it "was capitalism and globalisation that produced the clothes the protesters wear, the tents they sleep in, the food they eat, the phones in their pockets and the social networks they use to organise".[1] The kind of arguments that Mensch and fellow reactionaries made in response to Occupy were versions of those presented in Nick Land's extraordinary anti-Marxist texts of the 1990s. Land's theory-fictional provocations were guided by the assumption that desire and communism were fundamentally incompatible. It is worth the left treating these texts as something other than anti-Marxist trollbait for at least three reasons. Firstly, because they luridly expose the

1 Ian Birrell, 'Why the St Paul's Rebels Without a Clue Can't Simply Be Ignored', *Evening Standard*, 18 October 2012.

scale and the nature of the problems that the left now faces. Land fast forwards to his near-future, our near-past, in which capital is totally triumphant, highlighting the extent to which this victory was dependent upon the libidinal mechanics of the advertising and PR companies whose semiotic excrescences despoil former public spaces. "Anything that passes other than by the market is steadily cross-hatched by the axiomatic of capital, holographically encrusted in the stigmatizing marks of its obsolescence. A pervasive negative advertising delibidinizes all things public, traditional, pious, charitable, authoritative, or serious, taunting them with the sleek seductiveness of the commodity."[2] Land is surely right about this "pervasive negative advertising"—but the question is how to combat it. Instead of the anti-capitalist 'no logo' call for a retreat from semiotic productivity, why not an embrace of all the mechanisms of semiotic-libidinal production in the name of a post-capitalist counterbranding? 'Radical chic' is not something that the left should flee from—very much to the contrary, it is something that it must embrace and cultivate. For didn't the moment of the left's failure coincide with the growing perception that 'radical' and 'chic'

2 Nick Land, 'Machinic Desire', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007* (Urbanomic/Sequence, 2010), pp. 341–2.

are incompatible? Similarly, it is time for us to reclaim and positivise sneers such as 'designer socialism'—because it is the equation of the 'designer' with 'capitalist' that has done so much to make capital appear as if it is the only possible modernity.

The second reason Land's texts are important is that they expose an uncomfortable contradiction between the radical left's official "commitment to revolution, and its actual tendency towards political and formal-aesthetic conservatism. In Land's writings, a quasi-hydraulic force of desire is set against a leftist-Canutist impulse towards preserving, protecting and defending. Land's delirium of dissolution is like an inverted autonomism, in which capital assumes all the improvisational and creative vibrancy that Mario Tronti and Hardt/Negri ascribe to the proletariat/the multitude. Inevitably overwhelming all attempts by "the human security system" to control it, capital emerges as the authentic revolutionary force, subjecting everything—including the structures of so-called reality itself—to a process of liquefaction: "meltdown: planetary china-syndrome, dissolution of the biosphere into the technosphere, terminal speculative bubble crisis, ultravirus, and revolution stripped of all christian-socialist eschatology (down to its

burn-core of crashed security)".[3] Where is the left that can speak as confidently in the name of an alien future, that can openly celebrate, rather than mourn, the disintegration of existing socialities and territorialities?

The third reason Land's texts are worth reckoning with is because they assume a terrain that politics now operates on, or must operate on, if it is to be effective—a terrain in which technology is embedded into everyday life and the body; design and PR are ubiquitous; financial abstraction enjoys dominion over government; life and culture are subsumed into cyberspace, and data-hacking consequently assumes increasing importance. It may seem to be the case that Land, the avatar of accelerated capital, ends up amply confirming Žižek's claims about Deleuze and Guattari's work being an ideology for late capitalism's deterritorialising flows.[4] But the problem with Žižek's critique is twofold—firstly, it takes capital at its own word, discounting its own tendencies towards inertia and territorialism; and secondly, because the position from which this critique is made implicitly depends upon the desirability and the possibility of a return

3 Nick Land, 'Meltdown', in ibid., p. 442.

4 See Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (Routledge, 2004).

to Leninism/Stalinism. In the wake of the decline of the traditional workers' movement, we have too often been forced into a false choice between an ascetic-authoritarian Leninism that at least worked (in the sense that it took control of the state and limited the dominion of capital) and models of political self-organisation which have done little to challenge neoliberal hegemony. What we need to construct is what was promised but never actually delivered by the various 'cultural revolutions' of the 1960s: an effective anti-authoritarian left.

Part of what makes Deleuze and Guattari's work continue to be a major resource in the current moment is that, like the work of the Italian autonomists who inspired it and who were in turn inspired by it, it was specifically engaging with this problem. The point now isn't to defend Deleuze and Guattari per se, but to accept that the question that they raised—the relation of desire to politics in a post-Fordist context—is the crucial problem that the left now faces. The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the retreat of the workers' movement in the west wasn't only or even primarily due to failures of will or discipline. It is the very disappearance of the Fordist economy, with its concomitant 'disciplinary' structures, which means that "we can't just carry on with the same old

forms of political institution, the same modes of working class social organisation, because they no longer correspond to the actual and contemporary form of capitalism and the rising subjectivities that accompany and/or contest it".[5] Without a doubt, the language of 'flows' and 'creativity' has an exhausted quality because of its appropriation by capitalism's 'creative industries'. Yet the proximity of some of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts to the rhetoric of late capitalism is not a mark of their failure, but of their success in gaining some purchase on the problems of political organisation under post-Fordism. The shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, or in Foucault-Deleuze's terms from disciplinary to control societies, certainly involves a change in libido—an intensification of desire for consumer goods, funded by credit—but this doesn't mean that it can be combated by an assertion of working-class discipline. Post-Fordism has seen the decomposition of the old working class—which, in the Global North at least, is no longer concentrated in manufacturing spaces, and whose forms of industrial action are consequently no longer as effective as they once were. At the same time,

5 Éric Alliez, in 'Deleuzian Politics? A Roundtable Discussion: Éric Alliez, Claire Colebrook, Peter Hallward, Nicholas Thoburn, Jeremy Gilbert (chair)', *New Formations* 68:1, Deleuzian Politics?, p. 150.

the libidinal attractions of consumer capitalism needed to be met with a counterlibido, not simply an anti-libidinal dampening.

This entails that politics comes to terms with the essentially inorganic nature of libido, as described by (among others) Freud, the Surrealists, Lacan, Althusser and Haraway, as well as Deleuze and Guattari. Inorganic libido is what Lacan and Land call the death drive: not a desire for death, for the extinction of desire in what Freud called the Nirvana principle, but an active force of death, defined by the tendency to deviate from any homeostatic regulation. As desiring creatures, we *ourselves* are that which disrupts organic equilibrium. The novelty of the *Anti-Oedipus* account of history is the way that it combines this account of inorganic libido with the Hegelian-Marxist notion that history has a direction. One implication of this is that it is very difficult to put this historically machined inorganic libido back in its box: if desire is a historical-machinic force, its emergence alters 'reality' itself; to suppress it would therefore involve either a massive reversal of history, or collective amnesia on a grand scale, or both.

For Land, this means that "post-capitalism has no real meaning except an end to the engine of

change".[6] This brings us back to Mensch, and we can now see that the challenge is to imagine a post-capitalism that is commensurate with the death drive. At the moment, too much anti-capitalism seems to be about the impossible pursuit of a social system oriented towards the Nirvana principle of total quiescence—precisely the return to a mythical primitivist equilibrium which the likes of Mensch mock. But any such return to primitivism would require either an apocalypse or the imposition of authoritarian measures—how else is drive to be banished? And if primitivist equilibrium is *not* what we want, then we crucially need to articulate what it is we do want—which will mean *dis*articulating technology and desire from capital.

Given all this, it's time for us to consider once again to what extent the desire for Starbucks and iPhones really is a desire for capital. What's curious about the Starbucks phenomenon, in fact, is the way in which the condemnation of the chain uncannily echoes the stereotypical attacks on communism: Starbucks is generic, homogeneous, it crushes individuality and enterprise. At the same time, however, this kind of generic space—and evidently not the mediocre and overpriced coffee—is quite

6 Nick Land, 'Critique of Transcendental Materialism', in *Fanged Noumena*, p. 626.

clearly at the root of Starbucks' success. Now, it begins to look as if, far from there being some inevitable fit between the desire for Starbucks and capitalism, Starbucks feeds desires which it can meet only in some provisional and unsatisfactory way. What if, in short, the desire for Starbucks is the thwarted desire for communism? For what is the 'third place' that Starbucks offers—this place that is neither home nor work—if not a degraded prefiguration of communism itself? In his provocative essay 'Utopia as Replication'—originally titled 'Wal-Mart as Utopia'—Jameson dares us to approach Wal-Mart, that emblematic object of anti-capitalist loathing,

> *as a thought experiment—not, after Lenin's crude but practical fashion, as an institution faced with what (after the revolution) we can "lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus", but rather as what Raymond Williams calls the emergent, as opposed to the residual—the shape of a Utopian future looming through the mist, which we must seize as an opportunity to exercise the Utopian imagination more fully, rather than an occasion for moralizing judgements or regressive nostalgia.*[7]

The dialectical ambivalence that Jameson

7 Fredric Jameson, 'Utopia as Replication', in *Valences of the Dialectic* (Verso, 2009), p. 422.

calls for in respect of Wal-Mart—"admiration and positive judgement [...] accompanied by [...] absolute condemnation"—is already exhibited by the customers of Wal-Mart and Starbucks, many of whom are among the most trenchant critics of the chains, even as they habitually use them. This anti-capitalism of devout consumers is the other side of the supposed complicity with capital that Mensch sees in anti-capitalist protestors.

For Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism is defined by the way it simultaneously engenders and inhibits processes of destratification. In their famous formulation, capitalism deterritorialises and reterritorialises at the same time; there is no process of abstract decoding without a reciprocal recoding via neurotic personalisation (Oedipalisation)—hence the early twenty-first-century disjunction of massively abstract finance capital on the one hand, and Oedipalised celebrity culture on the other. Capitalism is a necessarily failed escape from feudalism, which, instead of destroying encastement, reconstitutes social stratification in the class structure. It is only given this model that Deleuze and Guattari's call to 'accelerate the process' makes sense. It does not mean accelerating any or everything in capitalism willy-nilly, in the hope that capitalism will

thereby collapse. Rather, it means accelerating the processes of destratification that capitalism cannot but obstruct. One virtue of this model is that it places capital, not its adversary, on the side of resistance and control. The reactionary elements within capitalism can only conceive of urban modernity, cyberspace and the decline of the family as a fall from a mythical organic community. But can't *we* conceive of consumer capitalism's culture of ready meals, fast food outlets, anonymous hotels and disintegrating family life as dim pre-echo of precisely the social field imagined by early Soviet planners such as L. M. Sabsovich?

> *Building on the whole tradition of socialist dreams of household collectivism, Sabsovich imagined the coordination of all food producing operations in order to transform raw food products into complete meals, deliverable to the population in urban cafeterias, communal dining rooms, and the workplace in ready-to-eat form by means of thermos containers. No food shopping, no cooking, no home meals, no kitchens. Similar industrialization of laundering, tailoring, repair, and even house cleaning (with electrical appliances) would allow each person a sleeping-living room, free of all maintenance cares. Russia would in fact become a vast free-of-charge hotel chain.*[8]

8 Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 199.

The Soviet system could not achieve this vision, but perhaps its realisation still lies ahead of us, provided we accept that what we are fighting *for* is not a 'return' to the essentially reactionary conditions of face-to-face interaction, "a line of racially pure peasants digging the same patch of earth for eternity",[9] or what Marx and Engels called "the idiocy of rural life", but rather the construction of an *alternative* modernity, in which technology, mass production and impersonal systems of management are deployed as part of a refurbished public sphere. Here, public does not mean state, and the challenge is to imagine a model of public ownership beyond twentieth-century-style state centralisation. There were clues, perhaps, in the architectural marvels from the dying years of the Soviet bloc, photographed by Frédéric Chaubin: "buildings designed at the hinge of different worlds, in which sci-fi futurism conjoins with monumentalism", "quasi-psychedelic, crypto-Pop".[10] While Chaubin sees these buildings as a temporary efflorescence brought about by the rotting of the Soviet system, can't we grasp them instead as relics from a yet-to-be-realised post-capitalist future in which desire and communism are joyfully

9 Nick Land, 'Making it with Death: Remarks on Thanatos and Desiring-Production', in *Fanged Noumena*, p. 281.

10 Frédéric Chaubin, *CCCP: Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed* (Taschen, 2010), p. 15, 9.

reconciled? "Neither modern nor postmodern, like free-floating dreams, they loom up on the horizon like pointers to a fourth dimension."[11]

11 Ibid., p. 15.